



## Literary Analysis of 'Anna Karenina' on British Screen

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on Anna Karenina, the famous masterpiece by Leo Tolstoy, and its latest screen versions. The fruitful collaboration, accomplished by two remarkable figures of contemporary British culture – the director Joe Wright and the playwright Tom Stoppard as a scriptwriter – was released in 2012. Since screen adaptation of classics, as well as any kind of remake, is undoubtedly challenging but nevertheless intriguing for both creators and viewers, it seems to be an exciting topic for research. The situation when a piece of great literature is transposed into a different medium, such as a film, commonly gives rise to fierce debates, which, in turn, becomes thought-provoking. What is more, the fact of making the film by the British crew basing on the Russian literary chef-d'oeuvre allows assuming the dialogue of cultures is implied in the considered work of cinematographic art. Thus, these aspects of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and its interpretation and reception are highlighted in the study undertaken. Furthermore, the study intends to analyse and investigate this masterpiece's literary and morphological aspects from a unique perspective.

**Keywords:** British Cinematography; Joe Wright; Leo Tolstoy; Reception; Russian Classics.

### 1. Introduction

A screen adaptation of a classical piece is always a challenge (Bakogianni, 2017; Palao-Errando, Loriguillo-López, & Sorolla-Romero, 2018; Pettey & Palmer, 2019). Firstly, it is widely known and commented on, most highly appreciated and reverentially treated by the public (Smith, 2019). What is more, everyone seems to know precisely what the author wanted to say by his/her novel and which interpretation is right and radically wrong. When we watch a classical piece on the stage or screen, there can be three types of reaction: 1) 'Just as I imagined (in this case most of us are quite happy)'; 2) 'Not quite true to the original (based of course on our understanding of it)'; 3) 'Absolutely different from what I imagined (and therefore wrong!)'. The authors of this article prefer the last one because, in this case, you are invited to revisit the piece you know very well and to have a dialogue or possibly an argument with the creators of the show or film.

Another question is whether it is worthwhile to adapt great literature to the screen as it inevitably loses some of its depth being transposed into a different medium. In this respect, we side with Fiona Wheeler, who argues that 'Film adaptations provide common ground. A young adult who reads Twelfth Night, Emma, and Anna Karenina can happily chat about the various screen adaptations of these works with their siblings, parents, and extended family (Aleksandrowicz, 2020; McCarthy, 2020; Sabol, 2018; Weste, 2019). In contrast, previously, their only interactions with these relatives might have been to be bullied, picked on, and otherwise negatively singled out as "different" because of their cultural reading list' (Wheeler, 2015). Very often, the screen version stimulates a deeper understanding of the text and discovering its hidden layers of meaning. As George Raitt justly remarks: 'Approaches to screening adaptation which either accept or reject 'fidelity' effectively hide from view the interrelations of difference that can be observed between literary and visual works of art. Further, comparative reading of a literary precursor and its screen adaptation alone hides from view the interrelations of difference between those and other works. By focusing on differences, screen adaptations



can be viewed and read together with literary precursors and other intertextual influences to produce new stories that would otherwise remain hidden' (Raitt, 2010).

Leo Tolstoy is one of the most emblematic authors in Russian classical literature, whose works are well known all over the world (Ahmed, 2019; Djemileva, 2019; Foster Jr, 2020; Kiseleva & Sakharchuk, 2019; Knapp, 2019). No wonder his major novels have been more than once staged and filmed both in Russia and abroad (Tushev, Bushkanets, & Frolov, 2018). However, this aspect of reception and interpretation of Tolstoy's works has not so far been adequately addressed. In this research, we give a comparative analysis of one of his major novels *Anna Karenina* and its screen adaptation by Tom Stoppard and Joe Wright in 2012.

### 1.1. Research Objective

In the analysis undertaken, various aspects of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and its interpretation and reception are highlighted. In addition, the thesis aims to examine and investigate the literary and morphological dimensions of this masterpiece from a specific perspective.

## 2. Methodology

There is a vast bulk of critique addressing screen adaptations of literary classics (Aleksandrovich Chiglintsev, Aleksandrovich Il'ichyov, Olegovich Kudratov, & Alexandrovna Belyaeva, 2019; Tajvidi & Arjani, 2017). As a rule, film adaptations are based on a comparative analysis of the relationship between a literary source and a film (Bohnenkamp & Lang, 2005; Gast, 1993; Pleimling, 2010). However, a number of efforts have been made to consider other intertextual relationships that arise as a result of film adaptations (Shchepacheva & Karasik, 2016; Wagenpfeil, 2006). Here we side with A. Eliseeva, who, in her insightful article, *Intertextuality Types of Screen Versions of Literary Works*, proves that this approach is auspicious as the adaptation of a literary work incorporates not only the text as such but also the elements of other types of art (Eliseeva, 2014). In our case, it is the interaction of literature, cinema, and theatre. Another issue relevant to the research is the problem of dialogue of cultures addressed in the research of (Sibgatullina & Krylov, 2016) and the paper of (Ozerova & Bekmetov, 2018) since, in our case, we deal with a foreign reception of Russian classics.

## 3. Results and Discussion

When we deal with a screen version of a monumental novel, we always face the same problem: it is impossible to reproduce all the richness of the text even in a TV series, let alone a two-hour film. There are several ways of coping with it: the simplest is just cutting some minor plot lines and characters, which often leads to simplifying the scope of the conflicts raised; the second quite often used – introduces the author's text read behind the screen. This approach very often results in reducing the whole interpretation to mere illustrations of the text. The third one, which is most difficult, is developing a language different from verbal, appropriate to the chosen mode of presentation. In our case, the screen, which may allow the filmmakers to relate the things that are verbally presented in the text by way of cinematographic means – visual imagery, camera work, scenery, music, plastics. In this case, the film director should know quite precisely what he/she considers to be the central message of the original and look for the adequate means of its representation.

These problems double when the novel to be screened belongs to a different culture. The most common approach is to make it look as authentic as possible. The question is whether it is possible at all. Very often, some small gestures or exclamations ruin it all. Thus, in some successful productions of Chekhov in the USA, the local colour, which they strived to sustain, was ruined in an instant when the characters made exclamations like 'Oops!' or 'Yoho!'. One critic wrote about an English production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* – 'There was a samovar on the table, but it seemed no one knew how to use it'. This is a common cause.

As for the Russians, by and large, they are quite arrogant about the attempts of the foreigners to stage or screen Russian classics; most critics, as well as the public, are absolutely sure that all such attempts are doomed by definition, and no foreigner is able to understand and impersonate the 'enigmatic Russian soul'. However, maybe other nations have the same prejudices. The question is what is more important when we are dealing with a work belonging to a different culture – to preserve the local colour as accurately as possible or to reveal the universal, panhuman elements, which actually make classics everlasting and immortal (Nosuke, 2014). We are in favour of the latter and will try to demonstrate



this viewpoint on the example of a very successful screen adaptation of one of the most well-known widely screened novels by Leo Tolstoy – *Anna Karenina*.

*Anna Karenina* is a novel, first published in book form in 1878, by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy. *Anna Karenina* is considered by many authors to be the greatest work of literature ever and Tolstoy himself named it his first real novel. It was originally published in the periodical *The Russian Messenger* in serial instalments from 1873 to 1877. A complex eight-part book, with more than a dozen major characters, is spread over more than 800 pages, usually contained in two volumes (depending on the translation and publisher). The themes of betrayal, faith, family, marriage, Russian Imperial society, desire, and rural vs. city life are discussed. The story focuses on an extramarital affair between Anna and Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky, a dashing cavalry officer who scandalizes Saint Petersburg's social circles and causes young lovers to flee to Italy in search of happiness. Their lives crumble further after they return to Russia. Throughout the book, trains are a recurrent theme, taking place against the backdrop of rapid changes as a result of the liberal reforms introduced by Emperor Alexander II of Russia, with many significant plot points taking place either on commuter trains or at stations in Saint Petersburg or elsewhere in Russia. The novel has been translated into different forms, including theatre, opera, film, television, ballet, figure skating, and radio drama. In 1911, the first of several movie adaptations was released but has not survived.

*Anna Karenina* consists of more than the story of the married socialite Anna Karenina and her affair with the rich Count Vronsky, while her story is a very powerful component of the plot. The story begins as she appears in the middle of a family torn up by the unbridled womanizing of her brother; something that prefigures her own later circumstance, while others would accept her less. Vronsky, a bachelor, is willing to marry Anna if she decides to leave her husband, Karenin, a senior government official, but she is vulnerable to the stresses of Russian social norms, the moral rules of the Russian Orthodox Church, her own vulnerability, her love for her son, and the indecision of Karenin. While they go to Italy, where they can be together, Vronsky and Anna have trouble making friends. Back in Russia, while Vronsky pursues his social life, she is shunned, becoming more alienated and nervous. She becomes increasingly possessive and obsessive about her imagined infidelity, fearing her own loss of control, despite Vronsky's reassurances. A parallel story in the novel is that of Konstantin Levin, a rich landowner who wants to marry Kitty, Dolly's niece, and Stepan Oblonsky's brother, Anna's sister-in-law. Until Kitty agrees, Levin has to propose twice. Until the birth of his first child, the novel details Levin's difficulties managing his estate, his eventual marriage, and his struggle to embrace the Christian faith. Throughout its almost one thousand pages, the novel discusses a wide range of subjects. An assessment of the feudal system that existed in Russia at the time includes some of these topics; politics, not only in the Russian government, but also at the level of individual characters and families, religion, morality, gender and social status. The novel is made of eight parts which the summary of its first three parts is given here:

*Part 1:* The novel opens with a scene introducing Prince Stepan Arkadyevich Oblonsky ('Stiva'), a civil servant and aristocrat from Moscow who was unfaithful to his wife, Princess Darya Alexandrovna ("Dolly"). Dolly has discovered his affair with the governess of the family, and the family and household are in chaos. In order to ease the situation, Stiva tells the household that his married niece, Anna Arkadyevna Karenina, is coming from Saint Petersburg to visit. Meanwhile, Konstantin Dmitrievich Levin ('Kostya'), Stiva's childhood acquaintance, arrives in Moscow in order to propose to Dolly's youngest sibling, Princess Katerina Alexandrovna Shcherbatskaya ("Kitty"). Levin is an enthusiastic, restless, yet shy aristocratic landowner who prefers to live on his large estate in the country, unlike his Moscow friends. He learns that Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky, an army cavalry officer, is also following Kitty. While meeting Anna at the railway station, Stiva bumps into Vronsky, who is there to meet Countess Vronskaya, his mother. Anna and Vronskaya were in the same wagon, riding and chatting together. A railway worker inadvertently falls in front of a train and is killed as the family members are reunited, and Vronsky sees Anna for the first time. "This is viewed by Anna as a "evil omen". However, Vronsky is infatuated with Anna and donates two hundred rubles to the family of the dead man, which impresses her. Anna is also uneasy about the first time she leaves her young son, Sergei ('Seryozha'), alone. At the Oblonsky house, Anna speaks to Dolly freely and deeply about Stiva's affair and convinces her that despite the infidelity, Stiva really loves her. Dolly is shaken by the speeches made by Anna and agrees to forgive Stiva. Kitty, who is coming to see Anna and Dolly, is only eighteen. She is supposed to have an excellent match with a man of her social standing in her first season as a debutante. Vronsky has been paying great attention to her and she plans to dance that evening with him at a ball. Kitty is very taken with the appearance and personality of Anna and much like Vronsky, becomes infatuated with her. She clumsily turns him down when Levin proposes to Kitty at her home, thinking she is in love with Vronsky



and that he will propose to her and encouraged to do so by her mother, who believes Vronsky would be a better match (as opposed to Kitty's father, who favors Levin). Kitty hopes to learn something concrete from Vronsky at the big ball, but instead, he dances with Anna, preferring her as a partner over a stunned and heartbroken Kitty. Kitty knows that, despite his blatant flirtations, Vronsky has fallen in love with Anna and has no intention of marrying her. Vronsky found his encounters with Kitty merely a source of entertainment and believes that for the same motives, Kitty behaved. Anna returns to St. Petersburg at once, rattled by her emotional and physical reaction to Vronsky. On the same train, Vronsky flies. The two meet and Vronsky confesses his love during the overnight journey. Anna rejects him, even though she is profoundly influenced by his devotion to her. Levin returns to his farm, crushed by Kitty's rejection, abandoning every hope of marriage. In St. Petersburg, Anna is returning to her husband, Count Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, a senior government official, and her son, Seryozha. Anna discovers that she finds him unattractive after seeing her husband for the first time since her experience with Vronsky, although she assures herself that he is a decent man.

*Part 2:* The Shcherbatskys are consulting doctors about the wellbeing of Kitty, which has been falling since the rejection of Vronsky. A specialist recommends that to recover, Kitty can go abroad to a health spa. Dolly listens to Kitty and knows that Vronsky and Levin, whom she cares for and hurt in vain, are suffering because of her. In reference to Stiva's infidelity, Kitty, humiliated by Vronsky and tormented by her rejection of Levin, upsets her niece, claiming she could never love a man who betrayed her. Stiva, meanwhile, visits Levin on his country estate while selling a plot of land nearby. In St. Petersburg, in the inner circle of Princess Elizaveta ('Betsy'), a trendy socialite and cousin of Vronsky, Anna starts to spend more time. Vronsky pursues Anna further. She finally succumbs to his attentions and starts an affair, even though she initially attempts to reject him. Karenin warns his wife, meanwhile, of the impropriety of paying so much public attention to Vronsky, which is becoming the topic of gossip. He is worried about the public image of the pair, although he erroneously assumes that Anna is above suspicion. A keen horseman, Vronsky participates in a steeplechase event, during which his mare Frou-Frou rides too hard, his irresponsibility causing him to fall and break the back of the horse. During the crash, Anna is unable to conceal her pain. Before that, Anna had told Vronsky that her child was pregnant. At the races, Karenin is also present and informs Anna that her behaviour is inappropriate. Anna confesses her adultery to her husband, in a state of intense distress and emotion. In order to prevent more gossip, Karenin asks her to break it off, hoping their marriage will be maintained. To recover from her ill health, Kitty and her mother head to a German spa. There, they encounter Madame Stahl, the wheelchair-bound Pietist, and her adopted daughter, Saint Varenka. Kitty, inspired by Varenka, becomes highly religious, but becomes disillusioned with the criticism of her father when she discovers that Madame Stahl is faking her disease. She returns to Moscow afterwards.

*Part 3:* Levin continues to work on his farm, an environment closely related to his challenges and spiritual thoughts. He deals with the notion of falseness, asking how he can get rid of it and criticizing what he believes is falseness in others. He develops concepts relating to agriculture and the special link between the farmer and his native land and community. He is of the opinion that because of the peculiar culture and personality of the Russian peasants, the agricultural reforms of Europe would not work in Russia. She wants to understand what happened between him and Kitty when Levin visits Dolly and to explain the behaviour of Kitty. Levin is very agitated by Dolly's talk about Kitty, and as he perceives her caring behavior towards her kids as fake, he starts to feel alienated from Dolly. Levin tries to ignore Kitty and contemplates the idea of a peasant woman being wed. A chance sighting of Kitty in her carriage, however, makes Levin understand that he really loves her. Meanwhile, Karenin refuses to split from Anna in St. Petersburg, insisting their relationship will continue. He threatens to take Seryozha away if she wants to have an affair with Vronsky.

So far, there have been 32 screen versions, let alone numerous stage adaptations. What is the secret of the unanimous success of this novel? There is nothing special in the story about an unfaithful wife, the more so that nowadays, divorces in most European countries are not a problem. There must be some deep psychological truth in the relationships described, in the ways the characters behave, in their interaction with a society that does not lose its topicality, no matter what century it is according to the calendar.

The film we will analyse was made in 2012 by the British director Joe Wright in collaboration with the renowned British playwright Tom Stoppard as a scriptwriter. This tandem proved very fruitful as the filmmakers managed to find an adequate language to transpose Tolstoy's text onto the screen. In our opinion, it was very much since Tom Stoppard is a playwright, and this prompted him to use theatre as the central metaphor and overlapping symbol of the film. Most part of the film unfolds itself in the theatre – on stage, behind the scenes, or in the hall. It brings to memory the famous line





from Shakespeare – 'All world is a stage, and men and women are merely players' (Shakespeare, 2009). At first, it looks that we are all invited to play: the rules of the game are set from the very beginning. It seems that the director claims from the start: 'we are not trying to give a realistic portrayal of Russia; we are playing Russia, showing it the way, we imagine', in what we fully agree with Polyakova E. (2002). On the backdrop, we see different Russian types – boyarin, nobleman, diakon, deacon, guslar, and others. The actors' movements are choreographed to the music, and the scenes shown are rather spectacular than true to life. Such a presentation of historical context does not require absolute authenticity as it is a make-believe Russia. Even the train, an ominous foreshadowing of the tragedy to come, is at first a plaything of Anna's son. It is a toy world, where people are like marionettes, and the strings pulling them are social rules which they have to follow. This is the world in which the major character of the novel – Anna Karenina lives and until she meets her true love, which makes her realize the falsity and artificiality of this world are quite contented. But even before it happens, we see that there is a different world – the theatre space opens up with the appearance of another main character, actually the author's protagonist and, at times, his mouthpiece – Konstantin Levin. He is a landlord who is very close to his peasants and enjoys working with them. He lives in nature and hates the conventions of society, it is a torture for him to wear dress suits, but mostly he hates the hypocrisy and pretence reigning around. He is a man of deep, sincere feelings. It is through his thoughts that the author relates most important of his own speculations on the nature of God and the goal of individual existence. However, the director having no space for it in the film offers us a very useful visual representation of the central conflict. This representation runs through the whole novel and determines the relationships of the characters and their place in it, the conflict between the natural, embodied in love, not restricted by any conventions, which becomes the symbol of spiritual freedom on the one hand, and the artificiality, pretence, hypocrisy, which characterize society – on the other. So, the whole space of the picture is sharply divided into indoor and outdoor scenes: most of the scenes with Levin take place either in the open air or in his country house, which does not look like a theatre set, unlike the Karenins' house. The episodes featuring Anna's and Vronski's happiness are also set in the open air. As opposed to it, we see the office where Steve Oblonski works. It is also the fashionable salon of Betsy Tverskaya where people move like marionettes in a carefully choreographed way. This creates the image of a mechanized, impersonal, and heartless community. There is also a theatre hall, where fashionable people watch a human tragedy unfolding in front of their eyes. It is incredibly expressive in the episode of the horse race, which takes place on stage. It becomes the climax of the first part when Anna exposes her feelings for Vronski in public, and the death of his horse foreshadows the tragic finale of Anna herself. This is the world that ruins Anna, because she does not want to follow the choreography, to keep up appearances and pretend. As one of the ladies of the world says: 'She is not breaking the law, she is breaking the rules' (Tolstoy, 2016) – the rules of society which she refuses to respect.

#### 4. Summary and Conclusion

Thus, two characters, who at first sight seem antipodes – Levin, a country gentleman, who hates city life, and for whom such thing as adultery is unthinkable, and Anna – a glamorous socialite, cheating on her husband and asking for divorce turn out to be on the same side of the conflict, while Vronski, the man she loves eventually supports the conventions. In this respect, the character of Karenin, brilliantly impersonated by Jude Low, deserves special attention. It is difficult to show in a film the evolution of this personage from the 'heartless machine', a statesman, who seems to care only for his career to the person with a broken heart capable of mercy and compassion. However, Jude Low is very psychologically convincing. Nevertheless, here again, the filmmakers found a highly effective visual image, which symbolically represents this interior process. In the end, we see Karenin with children – it is his and Anna's son Serezha and Anna's daughter. At first, it looks as if they are in the open air, but then we see that it is theatre, but half destroyed with living plants sprouting through boards of the stage. Thus, we can assume that Karenin is on the way of re-evaluating his life position from complete artificialness to the acceptance of the natural, which little by little is taking over, and the children freely playing in the grass are the pledge of this process.

No doubt that Leo Tolstoy is one of the symbolic and influential authors in Russian classical literature. His masterpieces are outstanding all across the globe. Nevertheless, the aspect of acceptance and appreciation of Tolstoy's works is still open to debate. In this study, we have analysed one of his significant novels Anna Karenina and its screen adaptation by Tom Stoppard and Joe Wright in 2012.

Although we do not get a comprehensive social panorama of the 19th century Russia as much as it is portrayed in Tolstoy's novel, Joe Wright succeeded in achieving the goal he set before himself, as he pointed out in one of the



interviews – that was to make a film about love. In his film, love being brilliantly impersonated by the all-star cast, supported by the witty script paly and the audio-visual means becomes the overpowering force symbolizing the most natural element which eventually, no matter how tragic the fate of the main character is taking over the falsity, artificiality, and conventions of society. The introduction of the theatre imagery helps the film makers to reinforce the significant motifs inherent in the novel and to substitute the verbal language for the visual one successfully.

#### 4.1. Contribution

In Russian classical literature, Leo Tolstoy is one of the most emblematic writers whose works are well known all over the world. No wonder his big novels have been staged and filmed both in Russia and abroad more than once. This aspect of the reception and analysis of the works of Tolstoy, however, has not been adequately discussed so far. We provide a comparative overview in this review of one of his major novels, *Anna Karenina*, and its 2012 screen adaptation by Tom Stoppard and Joe Wright.

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